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# It's just a (sexist) joke: comparing reactions to sexist versus racist communications

**Abstract:** Two experiments test whether using humor moderates the effect of the type of prejudice (racist or sexist) on evaluations of discriminatory communications. Experiment 1 examined a) the offensiveness of sexist and racist humor and b) whether jokes were judged as confrontation-worthy compared to statements expressing the same prejudicial sentiment. Racist jokes and statements were rated as more offensive and confrontation-worthy than sexist statements and jokes, respectively. Additionally, sexist jokes were rated as less offensive than sexist statements. Experiment 2 examined a) the perceived appropriateness of three responses (ignoring, saying “that’s not funny,” or labeling as discrimination) to sexist or racist jokes and b) the likeability of the confronter. Saying “that’s not funny” was the most acceptable response to jokes, but labeling a racist joke as racism was perceived as more appropriate than labeling a sexist joke as sexism. Finally, confronters of racism were liked more than those who confronted sexism.

**Keywords:** confronting, disparagement humor, sexism, racism

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## 1 Introduction

A relative tells a racist joke at a family gathering. A colleague makes a sexist statement during a meeting. Although people often want to say something when they hear a prejudiced remark, they rarely do so (Swim and Hyers 1999; Woodzicka and LaFrance 2001). Perhaps they do not know whether they should

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take the remark seriously, are unwilling to risk social sanction for confronting, or are unsure of how to respond. The present research investigates the extent to which humor affects perceptions that a comment is biased, whether such remarks are deemed confrontation-worthy, and beliefs about the most appropriate way to respond to biased remarks.

Understanding the factors that affect willingness to confront prejudice has important implications. Confronting prejudice can reduce prejudicial attitudes and change biased behavior (Czopp et al. 2006; Mallett and Wagner 2011). Czopp et al. (2006) found that confrontation was effective in decreasing stereotypic attitudes and biased responses. Moreover, men who were confronted for using sexist language were able to control sexist language use in the future (Mallett and Wagner 2011). Confrontation works in part by drawing attention to norms of egalitarianism and being non-prejudiced (Czopp and Monteith 2003; Monteith et al. 1993). If a confrontation occurs when other people are present, it may even decrease prejudicial attitudes and behavior in bystanders (Blanchard et al. 1994).

Everyday prejudice is communicated in many ways including via serious statements and jokes (Swim et al. 1998). Although the underlying sentiment is the same (e.g., women are better suited than men for domestic work), the mode of communication changes the interpretation of a biased remark. Humor communicates that one should not seriously consider the information being conveyed (Ford and Ferguson 2004). Apter (1991) refers to this playful frame of mind as the paratelic state in which the goal is to enjoy the interaction. Humorous messages, including prejudicial ones, signal that the message should not be critically scrutinized, but should instead be viewed as non-literal and outside the realm of moral scrutiny (Attardo 1993; Gray and Ford 2013; Zillmann 1983). In fact, an incident is perceived to be less severe when bias is framed in a humorous manner (Ford et al. 2008).

Previous research on confrontation has not addressed variation in the mode of communication, focusing solely on confrontation in response to discriminatory statements. This mirrors a trend in social psychology of generally ignoring humorous modes of communication in favor of focusing on serious ones (Martin 2007). The exception is research by Czopp and Monteith (2003) which included one (of three) confrontation scenarios that described confrontation in response to a joke that disparaged either Blacks or women. Participants were asked to imagine how they would feel if confronted after laughing while hearing the sexist or racist joke. Higher levels of negative self-directed affect were elicited when hearing a racist joke compared to a sexist joke, and the target's group membership mattered more in the joke scenario than in the statement scenario.

A message couched in humor can be just as, or even more, harmful than a serious message. For example, Ford (2000) demonstrated that exposure to sexist humor was associated with greater tolerance of a subsequently encountered sexist event. In addition, Ford et al. (2008) found that for men high in hostile sexism exposure to sexist humor led to more discrimination against women than exposure to a serious sexist message. Others have demonstrated that disparagement humor can promote discrimination against not only women, but also other groups that occupy a position of shifting acceptability in society (e.g., Muslims and gays; Ford et al. 2014). Individuals' perceptions of how humor impacts discriminatory messages may not be congruent with the real and damaging effects of such humor.

Crandall and Eshelman's (2003) justification-suppression model (JSM) of prejudice helps explain why humorous messages might be evaluated less seriously than serious messages. The model contends that due to egalitarian social norms prejudice is frequently suppressed, leading to few overt expressions even for those who are prejudiced. However, a justification enables a release of genuine prejudice by providing a situation or social norm that allows the suppressed prejudice to surface without fear of negative consequences. Humor can be viewed as a justification because people could say that they are laughing not at the message contained in the disparaging joke, but rather at the entertaining joke form.

As a result of using a less critical lens to interpret humorous, compared to serious, communications, people may be less likely to label disparaging jokes as discrimination and may be less willing to confront. In the current study we expect that disparaging jokes will be evaluated as less offensive and discriminatory than serious statements, even when they contain the same basic message. We also hypothesize that if jokes are rated as less offensive than statements, then jokes will also be perceived as less confrontation-worthy than statements. Blatant prejudice is often seen as more confrontation-worthy than subtle or ambiguous prejudice. In a review of the literature on confronting prejudice, Czopp and Ashburn-Nardo (2012) argue that the strength of a perpetrator's reaction to confrontation is directly proportional to the severity of the bias expressed. Compared to confrontations of subtle prejudice, confrontations of blatant bias are more readily accepted (Saunders and Senn 2009). Moreover, those who confront blatant bias garner more respect than those who do not confront (Dickter et al. 2011; Dodd et al. 2001).

There is also reason to believe that people will perceive and respond differently to prejudice that targets race versus gender. Past research shows that racism is perceived as more offensive and less acceptable than sexism. Cowan and Hodge (1996) found that participants evaluated racist behavior as

more offensive than sexist or anti-gay behavior. In the same vein, racist discrimination was perceived to be more prejudiced than similar sexist behavior (Gulker et al. 2013; Rodin et al. 1990). Finally, Czopp and Monteith (2003) found that people were more concerned about racial bias than gender bias. In fact, men found allegations of sexism to be amusing. The authors speculated that rather than stemming from genuine mirth, the amusement that resulted from being confronted as sexist may reflect patronizing condescension.

Confrontation rates also appear to be lower for sexism than racism. For example, Swim and Hyers (1999) found that only 15% of female participants verbally confronted a perpetrator of sexism directly, while Feagin (1991) found that between 60% and 70% of Black men reported verbally confronting a racist perpetrator. People may take sexism less seriously than racism because of the content of gender stereotypes and the deeply interdependent relationships that exist between women and men (Glick and Fiske 2001).

## 1.1 The current research

The current research tests whether the use of humor moderates the effect of the type of prejudice (racist or sexist) on evaluations of disparaging remarks. Asburn-Nardo et al. (2008) proposed a five-step model to predict when individuals will confront discrimination. The model asserts that an individual must first detect discrimination (Step 1) and then deem the incident as an emergency for which intervention is necessary (Step 2). Next, the individual must take responsibility to confront the discrimination (Step 3) and decide how to confront the incident (Step 4). The final hurdle involves taking action to confront a perpetrator (Step 5).

The current research focuses on Steps 1 and 2 in Asburn-Nardo et al. (2008) model. First, we investigate whether humorous messages are less likely to be perceived as offensive than their more serious counterparts. We believe that humor will act as a justification allowing pre-existing prejudice to emerge without fear of negative consequences (Crandall and Eshleman 2003). In short, observers of disparaging humor can contend that they were laughing at the form of communication, not at the disparaging message. However, humor may not provide adequate justification for racism because people typically take racism more seriously than sexism (Czopp and Monteith 2003). Thus, it is expected that discriminatory humor will be perceived as less harmful and worthy of confrontation than discriminatory statements, and that this effect will be more pronounced in the sexism condition because humor acts as an adequate justification for the release of sexism.

Even if an individual labels a disparaging remark as discriminatory, that person might not think that it is harmful enough to warrant intervention. Therefore, a second goal of the present research is to test whether the use of humor moderates the effect of the type of prejudice (e.g., racist or sexist) on the perceived appropriateness of three common responses to discriminatory communications: ignoring the comment, simply expressing disapproval by saying “that’s not funny,” and labeling the remark as biased. People hesitate to confront discrimination because of the well-documented social costs that accompany confrontation. Even when blatant discrimination occurs, targets who attribute a negative evaluation to discrimination are viewed as “whiners” and “complainers” (Gulker et al. 2013; Kaiser and Miller 2001). Similarly, Czopp et al. (2006) found that confronters were liked less than non-confronters. Yet there is some evidence that people may like those who confront serious statements better than people who ignore the remark. Dickter et al. (2011) found that participants liked and respected a person more when the person confronted blatantly offensive prejudice compared to when the person said nothing to address the prejudice. Each type of response (i.e., labeling bias versus saying it is not funny) may receive unique social sanctions. Moreover, social sanctions for confronting may also differ based on type of discrimination (sexism versus racism).

We test these questions in two studies conducted via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a web service sponsored by Amazon.com that allows people to complete studies posted online in exchange for monetary compensation. Mechanical Turk has been shown to be as reliable as other sampling methods for collecting survey data (Buhrmester et al. 2011). In both experiments, we limited our sample to residents of the United States.

## 2 Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to examine the degree to which sexist and racist communications were perceived as offensive and confrontation-worthy, and if these ratings were influenced by whether the sentiment was expressed as a statement or a joke. Participants were randomly assigned to read scenarios that varied by type of discrimination (sexism, racism) and mode of communication (statement, joke) and then answered questions regarding their perceptions of the incident. Because we were also interested in how personal responses might differ from perceived norms, we asked participants to first imagine how ‘most people’ would respond and then indicate how they ‘personally’ would respond.

## 3 Method

### 3.1 Participants

267 participants were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk website ([www.mturk.com](http://www.mturk.com)). Participants were 48.3% female and ranged in age from 18 to 70 years ( $M = 34$ ,  $SD = 12.75$ ). The majority of participants self-identified as White (78%), followed by Asian (9%), Black (6%), and Latino (4.5%). In addition, most participants (98%) indicated that English was their first language. Participants were compensated fifty cents for completing the study.

### 3.2 Materials and measures

#### 3.2.1 Scenarios

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four scenarios that varied in type of prejudice (racism or sexism) and mode of communication (statement or joke). All scenarios asked participants to imagine an event that occurred in the break room at work. We held the content of the joke constant and varied whether it was sexist or racist by changing the word "woman" (sexist) to "Black" (racist). The text of the joke was:

Imagine that you are hanging out with a small group of people in the break room at work and one of them tells the following joke: "What do you call a woman [Black] with half a brain? Gifted." This is followed by, "I've got another...What's the difference between a woman [Black] and a battery? A battery has a positive side."

The statement conditions contained the same biased sentiments as the jokes, but did not use humor. Again, we held the content of the statement constant and varied whether it was sexist or racist by changing the word "women" (sexist) to "Blacks" (racist). The text of the statement was:

Imagine that you are hanging out with a small group of people in the break room at work and one of them says: "It doesn't seem like women [Blacks] as a group are very smart." This is followed by, "Yeah, overall women [Blacks] don't have that many positive qualities."

#### 3.2.2 Post-scenario questionnaire

Participants rated how "most people" would react and how they "personally" would react to the scenario. All items used a scale from 1 (absolutely not) to 5

(absolutely). First, participants rated the funniness of the communication. Second, participants rated the degree to which the exchange was offensive using three items: *Would most people think this exchange is offensive?*/*Do you think this exchange is offensive?*, *Would most people think this exchange is harmless?*/*Do you think this exchange is harmless?*, *Would most people believe these jokes [statements] are socially acceptable?*/*Do you believe that these jokes [statements] are socially acceptable?* Participants were also asked to rate how common they perceive such an interaction to be in the workplace.

Participants then rated how worthy of confrontation the scenario was using four items: *Would most people think the person telling the jokes [making the statements] should be reprimanded?*/*Do you think the person telling the jokes [making the statements] should be reprimanded?*, *Would most people believe that the appropriate reaction to this exchange is disapproval?*/*Do you believe that the appropriate reaction to this exchange is disapproval?*, *Would most people believe that someone should point out that these jokes[statements] are social inappropriate?*/*Do you believe that someone should point out that these jokes[statements] are social inappropriate?*, *Would most people think that these jokes [statements] are worthy of confrontation?*/*Do you think that these jokes [statements] are worthy of confrontation?*

In addition, participants were asked whether they believed that the co-worker speaking was a male or a female, and to indicate the perceived race or ethnicity of the co-worker.

### 3.3 Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four scenarios varying in type of prejudice and mode of communication. After reading the scenario, they completed post-scenario measures regarding how “most people” would perceive the offensiveness of the communication, along with the degree to which it should be confronted. Next, they were asked to reread the scenario and think about how they personally would react to the scenario and complete the post-scenario questionnaire a second time with their personal perceptions. Last, participants answered four demographic questions regarding their sex, ethnicity, age, and whether English was their primary language.

## 4 Results

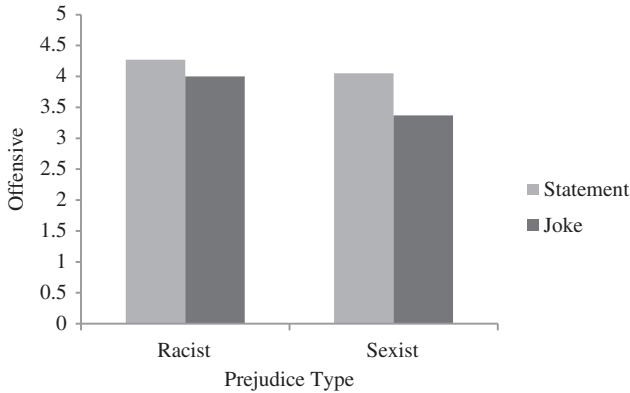
We first analyzed funniness ratings for the communication. A 2(prejudice type: racism, sexism)  $\times$  2(communication type: statement, joke) between groups

ANOVA was computed on the personal funniness variable. Jokes were rated as funnier ( $M = 1.79$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) than statements ( $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ),  $F(1, 263) = 24.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .79$ . The main effect of prejudice type was not significant, nor was the interaction. Although the relative comparison between jokes and statements was significant, funniness means were low. Participants also reported that hearing disparaging jokes in the workplace ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) is a more common occurrence than hearing disparaging statements ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $F(1, 263) = 10.26$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $d = .40$ . However, racist and sexist communications were rated as equally common ( $M$ 's = 2.61 and 2.64 respectively).

We created two variables to represent offensiveness (most-people offensive  $\alpha = .82$ , personal offensive  $\alpha = .85$ ) and two variables to represent the worthiness of confrontation (most-people confrontation-worthy  $\alpha = .86$ , personal confrontation-worthy  $\alpha = .90$ ). Not surprisingly, ratings of offensiveness were significantly correlated with ratings of confrontation-worthiness,  $r(259) = .70$ ,  $p < .001$  (for most people) and  $r(259) = .82$ ,  $p = .001$  (for you personally). All analyses initially included sex of participant as a group variable, but after we found no significant differences between sexes this variable was dropped from further analysis.

Two 2(perspective: most people, personally)  $\times$  2(prejudice type: racism, sexism)  $\times$  2(communication type: statement, joke) mixed ANOVAs were computed on the offensive and confrontation variables. The perspective taken while answering the questions was the within-group variable and the prejudice and communication types were the between-group variables. Participants reported that they personally found the prejudicial sentiments more offensive ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) than most people would ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ),  $F(1, 260) = 14.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.47$ . As predicted, racist sentiments were rated as more offensive ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) than were sexist sentiments ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ),  $F(1, 260) = 23.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.60$ , and statements were rated as more offensive ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) than jokes ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ),  $F(1, 260) = 30.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.69$ . These main effects were qualified by the predicted interaction between type of prejudice and mode of communication,  $F(1, 260) = 4.91$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ . (Figure 1). Racist statements were rated as more offensive than racist jokes,  $t(129) = 2.65$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $d = 0.47$ , but the magnitude of difference in offensiveness ratings for racist sentiments was not as large as that observed for sexist statements and sexist jokes,  $t(131) = 4.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.87$ . Tests of simple effects show that sexist jokes were rated as less offensive than sexist statements,  $t(131) = 4.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.87$ , racist jokes,  $t(141) = 4.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.81$ , and racist statements,  $t(140) = 7.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.27$ .





**Figure 1:** Mean offensiveness ratings as a function of the type of prejudice and mode of communication.

Analyses of the confrontation variable yielded similar results. Again, participants indicated that they personally found the exchange to be more confrontation-worthy ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) than did most people ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ),  $F(1, 251) = 9.18$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d = 0.38$ . Further, racist sentiments were perceived to be more worthy of confrontation ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) than were sexist sentiments ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ),  $F(1, 251) = 12.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.45$ . As expected, statements were also perceived as more confrontation-worthy ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) than were jokes ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ), regardless of the group that was targeted,  $F(1, 251) = 35.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.75$ . The interaction between prejudice type and mode of communication was not significant,  $F(1, 251) = 2.62$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ , although the group means showed the same pattern as for offensiveness; sexist jokes were rated as less confrontation worthy than sexist statements,  $t(126) = 5.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .091$ , racist jokes,  $t(136) = 3.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.65$ , and racist statements,  $t(135) = 7.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.28$ .

Most participants (96%) believed that the co-worker in the scenario was male. Chi Square tests revealed that this tendency to believe the speaker was male was stronger for sexist comments than racist comments,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.73$ ,  $p = .03$ , but the perceived sex of the perpetrator was not dependent on mode of communication,  $\chi^2(1) = .07$ ,  $p = .80$ . Responses regarding the suspected ethnicity of the co-worker showed more variability. Most participants (87%) believed that the co-worker was White. The remaining participants indicated that the race of the speaker could not be known from the information given (5%). A small number of participants indicated that the co-worker was Black (3%) and an even smaller number thought he was Latino (1%).

## 5 Study 1 discussion

Study 1 demonstrates that both the type of prejudice and the use of humor affect perceptions of biased remarks. When we held the content of a biased remark constant, participants rated racist communications as significantly more offensive and confrontation-worthy than sexist communications. This finding replicates previous research showing that racist behavior is evaluated as more troublesome than sexist behavior (Cowan and Hodge 1996; Gulker et al. 2013; Rodin et al. 1990) and that confrontation rates are higher for racism versus sexism (Czopp and Monteith 2003). As predicted, statements were seen as more offensive and confrontation-worthy than jokes expressing the same prejudicial sentiments. This may be because the joke fostered a non-critical mindset and softened the message (Ford and Ferguson 2004). It might also be because participants believed that disparaging statements were a less common occurrence in the workplace than disparaging jokes, and thus disparaging statements can be seen as a particularly non-normative and offensive way of expressing prejudice.

The most novel and relevant result of Study 1 was that sexist jokes were viewed as less offensive than all other forms of communication under consideration. People seemed to be aware that any type of racist remark was harmful and inappropriate, and the same standard was applied to statements that espouse sexism. In the current study, racist jokes, racist statements, and sexist statements were all rated with 4 or above (on a 5 point scale) on offensiveness. Sexist jokes, however, were viewed as much less troublesome (garnering an offensiveness rating of 3.4). This is particularly concerning considering research that shows the negative consequences of sexist humor occurs precisely because of the humorous nature of the message (Ford and Ferguson 2004).

The current study also tells us something about who people imagine to be the typical perpetrator of prejudicial messages. The overwhelming majority of participants reported imagining that a male was the source of the prejudicial message, and this was unaffected by whether it was a statement or joke. However, the type of discrimination depicted influenced whether the participant thought that the perpetrator was a male or female. In line with Inman and Baron (1996), sexist sentiments were more commonly attributed to a male perpetrator than a female perpetrator. This difference in the imagined gender of the perpetrator was not present for racist sentiments. We find a similar effect for the imagined race of the perpetrator of racist sentiments. Although some participants pointed out that the ethnicity of the perpetrator could not be known based on the information given in the scenario, most participants assumed that the person making the racist comment was White.

Finally, Study 1 found that participant's reported that their personal standards regarding the offensiveness of the message and whether it was worthy of confrontation were higher than how they believed "most people" would rate the scenarios. This finding can be explained in at least two different ways. First, research on self-projection indicates that people use their own attitudes and beliefs as an anchor for estimating how others would behave (Fisher 1993). It appears that when generating perceived norms for confronting discrimination, people may adjust their expectations for offensiveness and the worthiness of confrontation down from their personal standards. The opposite is also possible. People might adjust their own standard up from how they believe that others would respond. This self-enhancing strategy might capitalize on a sense of false uniqueness (Goethals et al. 1991). Regardless of why the discrepancy occurred, imagining the confrontation as falling out of the scope of the typical response may reduce the likelihood of actual confrontation.

## 6 Study 2

In Study 2 we examine whether the use of humor moderates the effect of the type of prejudice (racist or sexist) on perceptions of three confrontation response strategies. Plous (2000) documented several potential ways to respond to biased remarks including appeals to egalitarianism and inducing dissonance. Research finds that a variety of responses are effective; although people have more negative immediate reactions to assertive confrontations of prejudice, both assertive and non-assertive confrontations reduce future stereotypic responses (Czopp et al. 2006).

Similar to Study 1, participants read a scenario where one person told a co-worker a sexist or racist joke. At the end of the scenario, participants learned that the co-worker made one of three responses: doing nothing, saying "that's not funny!", or labeling the joke as biased by saying "that's racist/sexist!" We chose these responses because they are common reactions to disparaging humor and represent a range of assertiveness. Ignoring the joke is the least assertive response, yet still the most common way of reacting to prejudice (Czopp and Ashburn-Nardo 2012). The second two responses are more assertive in that they both convey that the discrimination is not welcome, but they vary with regards to the reason it is unwelcome. One states that the joke is not funny whereas the other labels it as biased. After reading the scenario, participants rated the confrontation, the confronter, and the joke teller.

Because humor induces a less serious mindset than serious communication, assertive confrontations to humor—even humor that expresses prejudice—might

be met with disapproval. We hypothesize that when responding to a joke, as the assertiveness of the response increases, so should the social penalties for confronting. Further, because sexism is perceived as a less serious problem than racism (Czopp and Monteith 2003) we expect that confronting a sexist joke will garner more disapproval than the same response to a racist joke.

## 7 Method

### 7.1 Participants

306 participants were recruited via Amazon's MTurk. About half of the participants were female (54%) and participants ranged in age from 18 to 79 years ( $M = 37$ ,  $SD = 13.75$ ). The majority of participants self-identified as White (77%), followed by Black (9%), Latino (7.5%), and Asian (5%). Ninety-eight percent of participants indicated that English was their first language. Participants were paid fifty cents for completing the study.

### 7.2 Materials and Measures

#### 7.2.1 Scenarios

Participants read one of six scenarios that contained either a sexist or a racist joke and a co-worker who responded by ignoring the joke, declaring that it was not funny, or labeling it as racist or sexist. The scenario described an incident between Pat and Alex in the break room at work where Alex tells a disparaging joke and Pat responds. The names Pat and Alex were chosen because both are gender neutral names. In all conditions, Alex is the perpetrator. The scenario read as follows:

Imagine that you are hanging out in the break room with your co-workers Pat and Alex. Alex tells the following joke: "What do you call a woman [Black] with half a brain? Gifted." After Alex finishes telling the joke, Pat [ignores] describes plans for the weekend [responds "That's not funny!; responds "That's racist/sexist!].

#### 7.2.2 Post-scenario questionnaire

All responses were made on a 1 (absolutely not) to 5 (absolutely) scale. Participants used two items to rate level of discomfort: *Alex's jokes make Pat*

*uncomfortable; Pat wants Alex to stop telling these kind of jokes.* Participants rated the appropriateness of Pat's response using the item *Pat's response to the joke was appropriate*. Then they used two items to report perceptions of Pat (*Pat seems like a nice person; I would like to be friends with someone like Pat*) and two items to report their perceptions of the perpetrator, Alex (*Alex seems like a nice person; I would like to be friends with someone like Alex*).

We were also interested in whether participants thought Alex and Pat were men or women. To this end, participants indicated the perceived sex of both Alex and Pat before providing their own demographic information (age, gender, and ethnicity).

## 7.3 Procedure

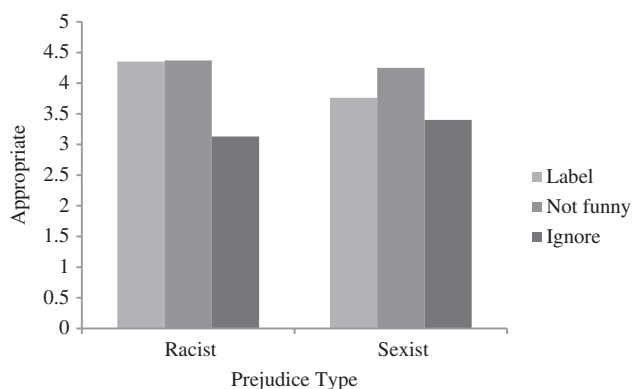
Participants accessed the survey through their MTurk worker page and were randomly assigned to receive one of six scenarios that varied the type of prejudice (prejudice type: sexist, racist) and type of response (response: ignore, not funny, label it as bias). Participants were asked to read through the scenario carefully and then complete the post-scenario questionnaire.

## 8 Results

All analyses initially included sex of participant, but as in Study 1, we found no significant sex differences and do not include the variable in the reported results. Next we tested whether the use of humor moderates the effect of the type of prejudice (racist or sexist) on ratings of discomfort. We created the discomfort variable by averaging the two items that measured Pat's discomfort ( $r = .78$ ). A 2(prejudice type: racist, sexist)  $\times$  2(response type: ignore, not funny, label it) between-groups ANOVA was computed on discomfort. The racist joke was perceived as inducing more discomfort ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than the sexist joke ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ),  $F(1, 298) = 5.25$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $d = .027$ . There was also a main effect of response type,  $F(2, 298) = 34.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.19$ . Participants believed that Pat was more uncomfortable when declaring that the joke was not funny ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) than when labeling it ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ),  $t(201) = 2.60$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = 0.37$ , or ignoring it ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ),  $t(203) = 8.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.17$ . Pat was also rated as more uncomfortable when labeling the discrimination than when ignoring it,  $t(198) = 5.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.72$ .

We then tested the perceived appropriateness of the response using a 2(prejudice type: racist, sexist)  $\times$  2(response type: ignore, label it, not funny) between-groups ANOVA. There was a significant main effect for response type,  $F(2, 299) = 21.09, p < .001, h_p^2 = 0.12$ . Ignoring the joke ( $M = 3.26, SD = 1.29$ ) was perceived as less appropriate than declaring it not funny ( $M = 4.31, SD = 1.12$ ) or labeling it ( $M = 4.06, SD = 1.20$ ),  $t(200) = 6.21, p < .001, d = 0.88$  and  $t(199) = 4.57, p < .001, d = 0.65$  respectively. This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction,  $F(2, 299) = 3.26, p = .04, h_p^2 = 0.02$  (see Figure 2). Labeling the joke as racist and saying that the racist joke was not funny were both rated as more appropriate than ignoring the racist joke,  $t(102) = 4.88, p < .001, d = 0.97$  and  $t(102) = 4.96, p < .001, d = 0.98$  respectively. However, saying that the sexist joke was not funny was rated as significantly more appropriate than labeling it as discrimination,  $t(100) = 2.35, p = .02, d = 0.47$  or doing nothing,  $t(99) = 3.73, p < .001, d = 0.75$ . The difference in appropriateness between labeling the joke as sexist and ignoring it was not significant,  $t(95) = 1.49, p = .14, d = 0.31$ .

We were also interested in perceptions of both the joke teller and the potential confronter. We created likeability variables for both Alex (the joke teller) and Pat (the potential confronter) by averaging the items that measured how nice they were and how much one would want to be friends with them ( $r = .83$  and  $r = .81$ , respectively). Overall Pat (the potential confronter) was rated as more likeable than Alex (the joke teller),  $t(301) = 15.79, p < .001, d = 1.82$ . A 2 (prejudice type: racist, sexist)  $\times$  3(response type: ignore, label it, not funny) between-subjects ANOVA revealed that Alex (the joke teller) was rated as more likeable when telling a sexist joke ( $M = 2.53, SD = 0.98$ ) than when



**Figure 2:** Mean perceived appropriateness as a function of the type of humor and response to humor.

telling a racist joke ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ),  $F(1, 299) = 34.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.68$ . In both cases, Alex was rated below the scale mid-point on likeability. None of the other effects were significant,  $F_s < 1.00$ .

In comparison, Pat (the potential confronter) was rated as less likeable when responding to a sexist joke ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) than a racist joke ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ),  $F(1, 297) = 11.55$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.39$ . In both cases, ratings of the confronter were above the scale midpoint on likeability. Further, there was a significant interaction between prejudice type and response type,  $F(2, 297) = 4.13$ ,  $p = .017$ ,  $h_p^2 = 0.03$ . When confronting a racist joke, Pat was rated as equally likeable when labeling the joke as racist ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) and declaring the joke not funny ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ),  $t(98) = 0.41$ ,  $p = .68$ ,  $d = 0.08$ . However, when Pat ignored the joke ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) likeability ratings were lower than when the joke was labeled as racist,  $t(100) = 2.91$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = 0.58$ , or declared not funny,  $t(100) = 3.36$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.67$ . This pattern was significantly different in the sexist condition. Pat was rated as less likeable when labeling the joke as sexist ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) than declaring it not funny ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ),  $t(101) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .038$ ,  $d = 0.42$ . There were no differences in likeability between ignoring the joke ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .79$ ) and saying it was not funny,  $t(100) = .87$ ,  $p = .38$ ,  $d = 0.17$ , or between ignoring and labeling it as discrimination,  $t(95) = 1.38$ ,  $p = .17$ ,  $d = 0.28$ .

Significantly more participants (96%) believed that the joke teller, Alex, was a man than Pat (63%),  $t(304) = 19.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.24$ . The decision to label Alex as a male was not dependent on the type of joke that he told,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.37$ ,  $p = 0.54$ , or the way that Pat responded to the joke,  $\chi^2(2) = 0.25$ ,  $p = 0.89$ . However, the participant's decision to label Pat as a man or woman was dependent on both the type of joke told and how Pat responded. Participants were significantly more likely to say that Pat was a woman (45%) if they were in the sexist joke condition compared to the racist joke condition (30%),  $\chi^2(1) = 7.72$ ,  $p = 0.005$ . In addition, Pat was perceived to be a woman more often if she confronted by saying the joke was not funny (47%) or labeled it as discrimination (41%) than if she offered no response to the joke (23%),  $\chi^2(2) = 14.49$ ,  $p = 0.001$ .

## 9 Study 2 discussion

Replicating Study 1, sexism was seen as less problematic than racism. Specifically, sexist jokes were perceived as causing less discomfort than racist jokes and the teller of a sexist joke was rated as more likeable than someone sharing a racist joke. More surprising was how individuals rated various

responses to disparagement humor. Clearly, most people believe that directly confronting racism is the best course of action, and that ignoring it is the worst. Indeed, Pat was rated as less likeable when ignoring the racist joke than when engaging in any type of confrontation.

Different rules appear to apply to sexist jokes. Labeling the joke as sexist is seen as less acceptable and those who confront in this manner are viewed less favorably compared to those who confront by simply saying the joke is not funny. Declaring a joke to not be funny was the top rated response to both sexist and racist humor. This may reflect comfort with confronting in a manner that focuses on the lack of humor rather than the content of the message. The confronter can communicate that the disparagement humor is not welcome without blatantly saying why.

Most people imagined the joke teller as a man. This may be because of beliefs regarding which sex is more likely to use humor, enjoy hostile humor, and engage in discrimination. Unlike Study 1, sexism was not attributed to a man more than racism. This might be because beliefs regarding who tells disparaging jokes are more prevalent than those regarding who engages in acts of sexism. The sex of the potential confronter (Pat), however, was linked to the type of joke that was told and the response to the joke. Pat was most likely to be viewed as a woman if a sexist joke was told and if confrontation occurred. It is worth noting that even when confrontation occurred in the face of a sexist joke, the confronter was more likely to be viewed as male than female. It might be that when people imagine a male joke teller, especially one telling off-color jokes, they assume that the audience is also male. This may be the default which can be altered in the face of a strong confrontation.

## 10 General discussion

The research presented in this article contributes to a growing literature on confrontation by testing whether the use of humor moderates the effect of the type of prejudice (racist or sexist) on evaluations of the remarks, the perpetrator, and the confronter. In Experiment 1, we found that sexist jokes were viewed as less inappropriate and confrontation-worthy than other forms of biased communication. In Experiment 2, we found that people perceived different strategies of confrontation as appropriate based on whether the humor was racist or sexist. Specifically, labeling a racist joke as racism and telling the joke teller that the racist joke is not funny were seen as equally and highly appropriate. However, labeling a sexist joke as sexism was seen as significantly less appropriate than declaring the joke not funny.



Collectively, our experiments enhance our understanding of why sexist humor is rarely confronted (Swim et al. 1998). According to Asburn-Nardo et al.'s (2008) model of confronting discrimination, an individual must first detect discrimination and then must deem intervention necessary. The current research demonstrates that individuals are not likely to see sexist humor as particularly troublesome and therefore do not deem it worthy of confrontation. This makes sense in light of research finding that humorous messages, including prejudicial ones, signal that the message should not be critically examined or taken too seriously (Attardo 1993; Gray and Ford 2013; Zillmann 1983). The current research shows that humor does indeed soften the perception of offensiveness for both racist and sexist messages, but that the effect is stronger for sexist messages. This could be explained by peoples' greater concern about racist messages relative to sexist messages (Czopp and Monteith 2003; Gulker et al. 2013; Rodin et al. 1990). Though humor softens the blow of racial discrimination, a racist message is viewed as offensive and deserving of attention. If sexism is already viewed as less concerning than racism, the humorous aspect of the message might lessen the impact further so that people consider confronting to be too strong of a response. Thus, according to the justification-suppression model (Crandall and Eshelman 2003), humor might act as more of a justification for sexist jokes than for racist jokes. Further, because the discrimination occurs in a humorous rather than a serious mode, it might be difficult for targets or bystanders to complain, because the source can claim that he was "only joking."

This research also demonstrates that there are different consequences associated with confrontations of racist and sexist humor. That is, those who label sexist humor as sexism are disliked more than those who ignore it. In comparison, there are greater costs for ignoring racist humor than for confronting. Although labeling sexist humor as sexism was perceived as too strong for sexist humor, labeling was rated as appropriate for racist humor. Declaring a joke not funny was perceived to be the most appropriate form of confronting racist *and* sexist humor and confronters who responded in this manner were rated as most likeable. Perhaps by placing focus on the humor and not the message, confronters are able to get their message across in a way that allows the joke teller to save face.

## 10.1 Limitations and directions for future research

These preliminary experiments inspire a number of questions for future research. First, our research employed analogue methods that required participants to imagine a situation. Research shows that anticipated or imagined

reactions often differ greatly from actual reactions (Mallett et al. 2008; Woodzicka and LaFrance 2001). This limitation was tempered somewhat in that we did not ask participants about how they personally would have responded to instances of discrimination, but rather asked them to rate others' actions. We expect that anticipating personal responses to a stressful situation would elicit more social desirability than judging the appropriateness of someone else's behavior. Still, exposure to an actual instance of discrimination would likely yield more internally valid results than imagining such a situation.

The current research examined a small portion of the steps laid out by Asburn-Nardo et al. (2008) as necessary to confront disparagement humor. The likelihood of detecting discrimination is based on a number of variables that we did not measure in the current studies, including the perceived intent of the communicator and whether the jokes are viewed as humorous. These variables deserve attention in future studies. Further, even if an individual detects discrimination and deems the incident as confrontation-worthy, that person must still take responsibility for confronting, decide how to confront, and ultimately take action. Continued research on each of these steps will advance our understanding of when and how people ultimately confront prejudice.

In Experiment 2, we limited our investigation to three popular responses to disparagement humor. Although research has not yet fully addressed the array of responses used by people who confront disparagement humor, we assume that many more responses exist than the three that we currently examined. Future research directed at cataloguing the most prevalent attempts at confronting humor would be useful. We used verbal confrontation techniques in part because of the ease in imagining those types of confrontations. However, we expect that some of the most frequent confrontations involve nonverbal responses such as frowning, head shaking, and looking away. We also expect that these more subtle confrontations to sexist humor would be viewed more positively and garner fewer social costs for those employing them.

## 10.2 Conclusion

The veil of disparagement humor as “just a joke” and its pervasiveness in popular culture make it an insidious means of promoting expressions of prejudice. Confrontation is an effective technique for decreasing stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination in the perpetrator and even potentially in bystanders (Blanchard et al. 1994; Czopp et al. 2006). Sexist humor appears to be particularly pernicious because it is judged as relatively inoffensive and not meriting confrontation in comparison to other forms of discrimination. Further, social

costs may be assigned to those who directly confront sexist humor. Given that past research shows that even mild confrontations can reduce prejudice (Czopp et al. 2006), it is worthwhile to identify responses to disparagement humor that people are willing and able to use. Highlighting this behavior as inappropriate is the first step in changing norms of communication in the direction of eliminating disparagement humor.

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